The White Man Who Grasps Negro Secrets

By LEONARD BENNETT.

WHEN a publisher receives over 10,000 letters of inquiry about and commendation of stories by an author it is time for the literary reporter to write him up.

Although Dr. E. K. Means, author of negro stories, fifty-seven of which have appeared in the Munsey publications, has only been writing for three years, he numbers his readers by the hundred thousand. Fortunately the appearance of a yellow jacketed volume spangled with huge red blobs and bearing no title but the author's name, *E. K. Means*, synchronized with one of Dr. Means's rare visits to New York. The yellow kivvered volume, the unconventional title and a glimpse of the contents of *E. K. Means* make you eager to know more of E. K. Means the man.

Dr. E. K. Means was born in Taylor county, Ky., where his father at that time had charge of a pastorate. Dr. Means is himself pastor of the First Methodist Church at Monroe, La., and has held pastorates in Shreveport, Baton Rouge, Minden and Arcadia. To-day he is practically the only author who is writing of the negro in negro dialect, and in his actual environment.

The Inscrutable Black.

"The white man does not understand the negro," says Dr. Means. "He is the great unexplored mystery, the unknown quantity. On the other hand, the negro knows all about the white man—what is in his pockets and what is in his brains; what he is thinking about.

"The negro goes into the white man's house; hears all, sees all, says nothing, thinks—no white man knows what he thinks. The white man rarely goes into a negro church or home, does not know how he lives or what he talks about.

"A group of negroes will immediately subdue their conversation on the approach of a white man. And yet," Dr. Means said with a suspicion of a smile on his face, "there are white men who will tell you that they know all about the negro."

For himself Dr. Means insisted, although he was born among them, raised in their midst and has studied them for years, and during that study has learned to love them, he has barely scratched the surface of negro psychology.

A New Race Consciousness.

"The negro is changing. The negro as Joel Chandler Harris knew him, with his folk lore and jungle tales, no longer exists; the negro of the reconstruction days who was feared as a menace is no longer to be considered as such; the negro, as we know him to-day, will not be in existence in a few years; the negro is solving his own problem."

It was here that Dr. Means made a statement which will be a revelation for many Northern readers, with whom the idea of negro preference for a "yaller gal" has become a tradition—a revelation which removes the menace, which appeared during reconstruction days, of wholesale intermarriage with the poor whites. The old order has changed, and Dr. Means declared that the negro to-day has acquired "a pride of race." There is little hope of advancement for the negro in the South to-day if he has white blood in his veins.

"In the colored Methodist church," Dr. Means asserted, "no candidate will be considered for a vacant bishopric unless he be as black as the ace of spades." As to the reason for this change of sentiment, Dr. Means would not commit himself, but offered the suggestion that the negro may have become aware of the biological law which dooms the admixture of black and white blood to early extinction. This significant fact, Dr. Means believes, may have been perceived by the negro, and he may be adjusting his life to conform with it. However, it is no use to try to find out from the negro, for he is inscrutable. As proof of this inscrutability, Dr. Means offered evidence regarding certain negro superstitions:

"What white man claiming to know the negro can tell you why they will never cook the heart of a chicken? Why a negro will never lay an axe to nor burn the wood of a tree that has been struck by lightning?

"Why," asked Dr. Means, "does a negro shake snake dust in his shoes and put a buzzard's feather in his cap before he will venture into danger?"

Dr. Means declares he has examined negroes upon these subjects without elucidating any more satisfactory reason than "They ain't no reason," and an unreadable smile.

And while on the subject of black magic, Dr. Means declared that his investigations into the subject had convinced him that certain individual negroes are possessed of a sixth sense, a "jungle sense."

"How otherwise can we explain the workings of the grapevine telephone, by means of which communications penetrate into the remotest districts, far removed from telegraph or railroad connection, and yet spread with a swiftness impossible to any known human agency."

A Prophet of the Flood.

The following story of the negro prophet and the Galveston flood is vouched for by Dr. Means:

Three weeks before the great tidal wave an old negro entered the office of the Galveston *News* and uttered such loud cries and lamentations, declaring that the city was to be engulfed by the seas, that he was led from the office. It was a good story, however, and as such was written up by a staff reporter.

A week from that date at the same day and hour the negro prophet reappeared and repeated his warning; he had worked himself up into such a frenzy that he had to be forcibly ejected from the office.

One week later the old negro appeared again, dropped on his knees on the floor and in tears besought the white people to give heed. When led from the office the old negro declared that this was his last visit, that before the week was out the city would be destroyed.

A reference to the files of the Galveston *News* three weeks before the date of the flood will corroborate this statement, which might be explained as an illusion and a coincidence, but how shall we explain instances of second sight and mind reading which Dr. Means has personally investigated?

Dr. Means told tales of mind reading by negroes who would repeat word for word to him what he was reading to himself out of a book, or what he had in his mind. If in reading he intentionally paraphrased a sentence, the negro would give both the original sentence and the paraphrase.

He told tales of negroes who could tell at a glance the weight of a herd of cattle, the number of sheep in a flock or the number of packages in a box, but the limitations of space unfortunately forbid the recounting of more than one instance, which is given for the special benefit of the sceptic, who can conduct a personal investigation, since the name of the negro and the place of his residence are given.

X-Ray Eyes.

In Minden, La., there is a negro boy named Webster, who is employed by a tailoring and pressing establishment. This boy has X-ray eyes. He can tell you what you hold in your hand, how many fillings you have in your teeth, how many pigs a sow will bring forth in her litter and what sex they will be. He has been tested to the utmost and has never been known to fail.

But this gift has proved anything but a blessing to the boy, who is a pariah in the community. He cannot set foot anywhere without being ordered out:

"Get out of here! Take those —— eyes off me!" is the sole advantage he has reaped from his strange gift. No inducement will prevail upon him to go North or to enter a clinic to make his gift available in the service of science. He remains in the little town of Minden and will probably be an outlaw hunted and harried to the end of his days.

Eight Good Stories.

But if the reader would know more of E. K. Means the man and what he has learned from years spent in study of the negro we must refer him to *E. K. Means* the book, which brings to mind the fact that in the absorbing interest of Dr. Means's stories, we have quite overlooked explaining the symbolism of the red blobs on the yellow kivvered volume—but this is something the reader had better ferret out for himself. As to the contents of *E. K. Means* the book:

There are eight negro tales in which the habitues of the Hen-Scratch saloon are depicted in various incidents of their colorful lives. There is a whimsical humor running through all these stories and a touch of the tragedy which haunts the laughing, music loving race. What reader, once he has read the tale *Hoodoo Eyes* will ever forget the prizefight in which Conko Mukes, having received instructions from Prof. Dodo Zodono, proceeds to put his opponent to sleep by the hypnotic route. "Sleep! Sleep! Sleep, Hitch Diamond, go to sleep!" And in the last tale of the book, where the fortunes of Hitch Diamond are again featured, there are as many tears as laughs involved in a tale of adventure which thrills the reader from the very start to the dramatic finish.

E. K. Means is a raconteur to be reckoned with. There is no moral to his tales, no attempt at "uplift," and, although the author maintains that the negro is inscrutable, you cannot lay down this book without feeling that you have a better understanding of and a higher regard for the race E. K. Means has so luminously portrayed.

E. K. MEANS. By E. K. Means. G. P. Putnam's Sons. $1.50.

"I Feel, I Feel, I Feel" Is Miss Richardson's Plot

THE reader of Dorothy Richardson's *Honeycomb* has momentary wonderings as to whether he, or the author, is insane. Here is an interesting type of mental affection, but one that would be extremely annoying if protracted for a great length of time. The reader is absolutely sure, however, that the characters in the novel are paranoiacs.

The book is an exotic piece of fiction, an advanced example of impressionistic narrative. There is no action to speak of, no structure of plot, no ladder of interest, no climax. The value of the book, pronounced and striking at times, is in description rather than in narration.

What holds the reader's attention is the vividness of the apprehensions of color, motion, sound, taste, feeling.

The central character, a governess in a wealthy English home, is extraordinarily alive and has active and dreamy impressions of the things and persons about her. Her mind functions almost solely by sense impressions. She fairly revels in her feelings about everything that touches her, every person who comes within her line of vision. Her rather morbid emotions have all the neurotic egoism and overpowering superlativeness of Mary McLane's, while fortunately lacking the Montana spinster's erotic imaginings.

The volume shows excellent power of characterization without action, of analysis through appearance. The persons who come under the scrutiny of this governess hating her job are alike yet different, and she senses their real nature, their hard, bright lives cankered at the core, their outward glitter and inward lonely dulness of yearning. Probably there are such persons in the world, but it is unlikely that so many should be brought together in one small group—that there should be no relieving idealism, no trait worthy of admiration.

The work has an unusual power of suggestiveness in description, a sympathetic sense of beauty and a poetic style of expression at times. The scenes from nature are more human, less rasping than the pictures of the men and women.

A few passages quoted at random will serve to illustrate the eccentric nature of this piece of impressionism. Note particularly the casting off of the shackles of grammar and rhetoric, the disregard of conventionalities of sentence structure and punctuation:

Spring—a sudden pang of tender green seen in suburban roadways in April . . . but evidently there was another spring, much more real and wonderful that she had not known—not a clear green thing, surprising and somehow disappointing you, giving you one moment and then rushing your thoughts on through vistas of leafage, tawny and purple gleamings through soft mist, promising . . . a vision of spring in dim rich faint colors, with the noisy real rushing spring still to come . . . a thing you could look at and forget, go back into winter and see again and again, something to remember when the green spring came, and to think of in autumn; spring; coming; perhaps spring was coming all the year round.

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But Joey did not know him. She only knew that he had a life of his own and no one else at the table had. She did not know that with all his worldly happiness and success and self-control he was miserable and lost and needing consolation . . . but neither did he.

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Mrs. Corrie sat deep in her large chair, dead and drowned. Dead because of something she had never known. Dead in ignorance and living bravely on—her sweet voice rising above the gloom where she lay hid—a gloom where there were no thoughts. Nearly all women were like that, living in a gloom where there were no thoughts.

And so on indefinitely! The book is good of its kind, but no one would wish an oversupply of the kind.

HONEYCOMB. By Dorothy Richardson. Alfred A. Knopf. $1.50.